

Editorial

Every generation must fight its own battles. Over the centuries, the Church has faced many struggles. Paul opposed the Judaizers, and at one point even challenged Peter, in his “good fight” for the true gospel. Later, the apostle predicted that even some from within the Ephesian church would wreak havoc with their teaching. Hymenaeus and Alexander erroneously held that the resurrection had already taken place. Peter writes of some who claimed that God does not intervene in human history and thus discounted his teaching concerning the second coming of Christ. Jude wrote a scathing letter denouncing those who exchanged the grace of God for licentiousness and immorality. John, in his epistles, spoke out against false teachers who had claimed to be without sin and who denied that Jesus had “come in the flesh.” The book of Revelation contains the names of several heretics, including the “woman Jezebel,” the first-mentioned female false teacher in the New Testament.

The sub-apostolic period continued to witness a fierce battle for the truth of the gospel. Marcion argued that only portions of Luke and other New Testament passages of his liking were to be included in the Christian canon. Irenaeus wrote *Against Heresies*, opposing the Gnostics. The apologists crafted skillful defenses for the Christian faith, demonstrating the intellectual respectability of the gospel. All the while, persecution punctuated the existence of the early Christians, testing the faith and commitment of many. Through the Middle Ages and into the Reformation, the problem arose of an ecclesiastical hierarchy that carefully guarded its own political and religious power by monopolizing the right to biblical interpretation and by exploiting prevailing superstition through a system of indulgences and other unbiblical practices and demands.

The Enlightenment changed all that, and ecclesiastical doctrinal control increasingly gave way to an interpretive solipsism by which a given exegete is said to be entitled to his or her own independent judgment regardless of tradition, interpretive communities past or present, and, in some cases, even the text itself. The pendulum swing in some circles seemed so severe that even those in the Protestant tradition despaired of such an interpretive freedom-turned-bondage that they have sought refuge under the wings of Roman Catholicism or the Orthodox Church. In other cases, the results have been an unfettered historical criticism that led to an erosion of the authority and trustworthiness of Scripture; a variety of literary methodologies that have jettisoned the notion of the extratextual referentiality of the biblical and other texts; an existentialism or nihilism that declared all human existence ultimately meaningless; or a postmodern rejection of the Enlightenment notion of rationality in favor of an unapologetically subjective reader-oriented hermeneutic.

As this potted survey of Church history demonstrates, while the enemies of the gospel have had different names, be it individuals or institutions, many of the issues have remained the same: the truthfulness and trustworthiness of Scripture and of the apostolic testimony; the proper

formulation and appropriation of the Christian gospel; and the content of God's revelation regarding himself, the Christ, the end times, and so on. But this does not mean that everything has remained the same. While not everyone would agree, most would argue that while the specific Christian truth that was contested varied from age to age, over most of Church history there was an underlying consensus that there was truth to be known, and the question was simply whose version of the truth was the correct one. However, it is precisely this foundational consensus that there is truth to be known that has eroded in recent decades.

This, of course, presupposes that already early on in the history of the Church there was a definition of the gospel and of Christian truth (call it "proto-orthodoxy") that formed the standard for the Church's teaching and later formulations. While not everyone would agree (from Walter Bauer to Bart Ehrman), I believe this is amply borne out by the NT witness (e.g. Acts 2:42; Rom 1:1–4, 15–17; 1 Cor 15:3–4; 1 Tim 1:3, 11; 2 Tim 1:13–14). The present issue of this *Journal* contains a compelling refutation of the Bauer thesis with regard to Ephesus by Paul Trebilco, and Jeffrey Bingham's article likewise raises appropriate concerns with these kinds of constructs. Darrell's Bock's forthcoming book on *The Missing Gospels* adds to the increasingly forceful chorus rejecting "from diversity to uniformity" theses that, in true postmodern fashion, view orthodoxy primarily, if not exclusively, in terms of institutional or individual power rather than as a function of divine revelation and timeless truth.

The plenary addresses delivered at last year's annual meeting, especially those given by R. Albert Mohler, J. P. Moreland, and Kevin Vanhoozer, also come to mind (now published as *Whatever Happened to Truth?*). The latter volume contains not only a powerful critique of postmodernism but also tools for cultural analysis and a constructive proposal for an evangelical hermeneutic that retains a commitment to inerrancy, properly defined, while seriously engaging the questions raised by the emergence of the postmodern paradigm. (In the interest of full disclosure, the editor of the *Journal* also served as editor of the just-mentioned work.) Another exceptionally insightful recent effort is David F. Wells's *Above All Earthly Pow'rs: Christ in a Postmodern World*.

Every generation must fight its own battles. Many in the previous generation, from Francis Schaeffer to those responsible for the Chicago Inerrancy statement and the conservatives in the Southern Baptist Convention, have fought for biblical authority and scriptural inerrancy. We must be ever-vigilant not to jettison the gains made by those who stood firm in those battles. Yet at the same time, we must not stop where those efforts stopped, because time has not stood still since then. If in any generation the Church fails to address the issues that are on the forefront of the surrounding culture, it, to the extent that it does, weakens the strength of the Christian gospel in relation to the world which it is called to reach. For this reason yesterday's answers will not do for today's questions. New answers are needed to address the new issues of our day.

The vitality of the evangelical movement rests to a significant extent on the way in which our best thinkers reflect on the issues of our time and formulate answers to these matters, be it those arising from new medical advances or challenges to the very notion of truth. The advent of the internet has added yet another new dimension to the way in which information is disseminated and processed. I see many positive signs of vitality in our ranks, with voices such as R. Albert Mohler, Kevin Vanhoozer, D. A. Carson, and David Wells, among others, leading the way. With the apostles, we contend for “the faith once delivered to the saints.” Yet it is no longer the Judaizers, nor those selling indulgences that must be opposed. New challenges call for new arguments and approaches, and once again God’s call is for those who are able to discern the times and help the Church to render every argument captive to Christ.

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